

Salton Sea Monsters

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SOMETIMES IT TAKES A POSTCARD FROM BOISE to point out a lost gem right under our noses. In this case, the news came in the familiar blocky handwriting of English professor Tom Trusky: "Can't resist informing you about 'The Monster That Challenged the World', a B (C?) Grade flick about atomic snails that arise from (sitting down?) the Salton Sea!

"Are there other Dead Sea flicks?" Tom continued. "Is there a Pulitzer winning article here?"

Taking the bait, I phoned a few people who live around the Sea but most of them had never heard of a movie about radioactive snails in their backyard. Curious. You'd think this would be common knowledge. On a sleepy summer day, homegrown monster movies are a natural conversation starter.

When I did more checking, it appeared even monster movie fans have overlooked this 1957 film, though some say that's a shame. The Salton Sea's own man-versus-mollusk movie is considered a classic, up there with "The Blob", "The Crawling Eye" and other choice Saturday afternoon entertainment.

"'The Monster That Challenged the World' is a highlight among 1950s creature-features," one critic wrote.

"I actually like it more than the 'Creature from the Black Lagoon', which has a better-looking monster for sure," said another.

Of course, we're not here to rate monster movies. The import of this horror film is the way it weaves in Salton Sea history and myth. The story is set on a Naval Station on the south end of the Sea, home of top secret atomic experiments.

An earthquake shakes the valley and fissures open at the bottom of the Sea, freeing giant mollusks with a taste for human prey. Tim Holt, starring as Navy Commander John Twillinger, leads a counterattack on the slimy devils.

It sounds like it's strictly the product of a screenwriter's nightmares, but there really was a naval facility at the south end of the Sea, 47 miles south of Indio and four miles east of Highway 86. When the sea level rose, most of the buildings were submerged or wrecked, and all that remains is vandalized ruins.

The base doubled as a South Pacific Island in the 1942 Paramount Studios film "Wake Island" and was the site of inert atomic weapon tests soon after. Some of the bombs went astray and, in 1949, headlines in LA Newspapers read: "Niland Bomb Scare".

A newspaper-reading screenwriter probably got the idea that radiation released beneath the sea could give birth to mondo snails, and a blockbuster movie.

The script plays on a long-standing image problem. If the Salton Sea was a celebrity, it'd be Michael Jackson-known not for its greatest hits but for being strange. Words like sinister, freakish, forbidding, edgy and toxic come easily to mind when people talk about the Sea.

Here in the Coachella Valley we blame every foul wind on the Salton Sea, even if the stench is really coming from a neighbor's garbage can.

The 2002 film "The Salton Sea" with Val Kilmer perpetuated the depravity theme, as did earlier magazine articles with titles such as: "Troubled Stepchild of Man and Nature", or "Nature's Freaks on the Salton Sea".

One online reviewer of "The Monster That Challenged the World" says she lives at the Sea and screens the horror film for houseguests when the salt wind blows. "There are so many strange things going on at 'the weirdest body of water on earth'" she writes. "You could make a sci-fi film every month of the year here: bioluminescent tides on full moons, eight-foot waves during Borrego windstorms, wrath-of-God sandstorms ..."

So when Commander Twillinger asks the base scientist: "Would you say the water in the sea could be radioactive?" he's voicing what we've always suspected.

Go ahead and enjoy this mid-century treasure (MGM recently re-released the movie in DVD format). There are 1950s vistas of the Sea, along with scenes shot on Catalina Island, along the All-American Canal and in a tank filled with plastic seaweed. But as you're watching consider it might be time for an image change.

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of the Sea; 1905 was the year flood waters from the Colorado River broke through a canal gate, filling the basin.

"We're planning a celebration, but we're not celebrating a mistake of nature or man," says Norm Niver, an Imperial Valley planning commissioner and an authority on the Sea. "We're celebrating one of the many Salton Seas that have been here throughout history."

As the sea's birthday approaches, this is a good time to follow Commander Twillinger's lead. Let's banish the killer snails along with the freaky metaphors for the Sea. As the movie ends, the sea is once again glassy and inviting, and safe for little girls to swim in.